

THE ART AND THOUGHT OF ROBERT BROWNING ¹

I

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AS between his hearers and himself the present "exchange professor" is somewhat at a disadvantage. They have often seen foreign professors, even sometimes Belgian lecturers, whereas this Belgian professor has never seen a new continent and owes to the generous policy of the C. R. B. Educational Foundation one of the great events of his life, an experience as precious to his heart as to his mind. To me there is something like a magical spell in those very initials, C.R.B. (Commission for Relief in Belgium), since I saw them on those sacks in which America during the war actually sent us our daily bread. I felt attracted to the country from which the sacks came, and the attraction constantly increased while I was translating into French a book you all know, written by your former ambassador or minister, Mr. Brand Whitlock, on *Belgium under the German Occupation*, and dealing extensively with the memorable work of the American commission. The heart of the patriot, therefore, was longing to see your country, but to the same C.R.B. the mind of the

¹ A series of four lectures delivered at the Rice Institute on December 9, 10, 11, and 12, 1925, by Paul de Reul, Professor of English and Modern Literature at the University of Brussels. These particular lectures were also included in courses which Professor de Reul, in his capacity as Exchange Professor on the C.R.B. Educational Foundation, gave at a number of American colleges and universities during the academic year 1925-26.

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man is no less indebted for the benefit of contact with a new world where daily one finds new and newer revelations. In short, whereas the lecturer has enormously to learn from his present contacts, he recognizes in turn how little he has to give in exchange, especially when speaking on topics in English literature, which of all subjects are probably the best known to his hearers. As to the particular subject I have chosen for these lectures, my only justification is that a lecturer generally prefers to speak of what he loves, and here also, perhaps, lies one possible attraction of the present course.

It may not be a matter of indifference to people of this great nation that some people in that far away little Belgium, speaking French or Flemish or Dutch, keenly study and appreciate certain of your writers, English and American. The last point I can easily prove by two striking instances. Our best Flemish poet, the great poet Gezelle, a priest in the mediæval city of Bruges, celebrated by Longfellow, has translated into Flemish verse Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. Our best prose writer in French, Maeterlinck, has been obviously influenced by Poe in his first plays and by Emerson in his moral essays. But leaving American literature, there is something more to the point. The same Maeterlinck in a passage of his tragedy *Monna Vanna* has imitated Robert Browning, the English poet I am to speak of to-night, and to this attention was first called by an American literary critic, Professor Phelps of Yale University.

When *Monna Vanna* appeared twenty years ago, Professor Phelps pointed out, in the *Independent*, the striking similarity between a scene in the second act, and a scene of that almost forgotten play of Browning, *Luria*. Professor Phelps sent his article to Maeterlinck, and received the

following reply: "I have just read with interest, in the *Independent*, the article that you have devoted to *Monna Vanna*. You are absolutely right. There is between an episodical scene in my second act (where Prinzivalle unmasks Trivulzio) and one of the great scenes in *Luria* a similarity that I am surprised has not been noticed before. I am all the more surprised, because, far from concealing this similarity, I tried myself to emphasize it, in taking exactly the same hostile cities, the same epoch, and almost the same characters: when it would have been easy to transpose the whole thing and make the borrowing unrecognizable, had I wished to deceive. I am an eager reader and an ardent admirer of Browning, who is in my opinion one of the greatest poets that England has ever had. This is why I regard him as belonging to classic and universal literature, which everybody is supposed to know. It is then natural and legitimate to borrow a situation or rather a fragment of a situation, just as one borrows daily from Æschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. Such borrowings when they are concerned with poets of this rank, and are so to speak *coram publico*, are really a kind of public homage."

This partiality of Maeterlinck for Browning is, however, exceptional. Browning is, in fact, very little read with us. Other English poets are better known and if I may be allowed to quote myself, just as a document, I have written a book in French on Swinburne which is at any rate bigger than anything written in English. But I shall not repeat on Swinburne what is already printed. I have chosen Browning as a subject because, at the very time the invitation came to me from the Educational Foundation, I was actually engaged in studying him, with a view to making him better known to my own countrymen.

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You will then have Browning, "as he strikes a contemporary"—contemporary meaning, in this instance, a foreigner with perhaps here and there some curious sidelights on the subject. I am not going, of course, to analyze the works of the poet. With a subject so well known as to be almost antiquated, I must keep to some leading points, to a general survey, with possibly here and there an adjustment. I shall begin with a short account of Browning's reputation in his own country, to justify my view that he has been admired too little for his art and too exclusively, even perhaps too much, for his "teaching." I shall then examine with more detail first his art, secondly his teaching or thought.

Everybody knows that, in the Victorian Age which his career, parallelling that of Tennyson, fills almost exactly, Browning was forty years later than Tennyson in coming to be understood by the general public. During that first period, Browning appears like an eccentric person speaking as it were to himself by the wayside, munching words hard like pebbles, looking at you with searching looks, much like the mysterious man he speaks of in *How it Strikes a Contemporary*:

Scenting the world, looking it full in face,¹
. you stared at him,²
And found, less to your pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know you and expect as much.

Sometimes, that soliloquizing wizard would apostrophize the passers-by:

Well, British Public, ye who like me not.^s

Sometimes he would even make some histrionic gesture, tossing the yellow book which was the source of *The Ring and the Book* and which has been published by Professor

¹ See page 303 for references to the Globe Edition of "The Works of Browning."

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Hodell, under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution of Washington:

Here it is, this I toss and take again.⁴

The public went its way and heeded him not. This is scarcely an exaggerated picture. To be sure, Browning the bard was early appreciated by John Forster, and by Landor, who wrote:

. . . . Since Chaucer was alive and hale,⁵
No man hath walkt along our roads with step
So active, so inquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse.

But, on the other hand, it must not be forgotten that *Sordello* was found an absolute puzzle not only by the man in the street but even by Tennyson, Carlyle, and Douglas Jerrold.

For the great majority, Browning in the first part of his career was an unintelligible talker for whom the best to be said was that he was the husband of Elizabeth Browning. This bewilderment on the part of the public arose from an extraordinary novelty in the language and thought of the poet, in the things he said and in his way of presenting them. Some of this novelty is, of course, individual, and therefore undefinable. But a good deal of it may be explained by saying that Browning had absorbed the searching, critical spirit of the nineteenth century before his readers had begun to realize their own time; that he was more intellectual than any previous poet and the first to carry into poetry, as Balzac did in the French novel, the curiosities and methods of contemporary science. He enlarged the field of poetry, speaking to his readers of things they did not know nor care for, and which he supposed them to know. He was in advance of his public, because he had worked out his own education, having had

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the privilege of not attending those public schools where English boys are modelled on the same type, taught to love and hate and know the same things, but left to ignore many others. Being a non-conformist, he went to neither of the older English universities, and, except for a few weeks in London, had no university experience. Italy, he said, was his university. The result was that Browning knew much of the history of art, the history of religion, and of psychology, before these sciences were even thought of in British universities.

Though Browning had less knowledge of physical science than he has been credited with, he is full of scientific enthusiasm, of the spirit of research. He has personified that spirit in the vagrant Arab physician, Karshish, in the Grammarian of the *Grammarian's Funeral*, even in the man of Valladolid, who "took cognizance of men and things", so that you might

surprise the ferrel of his stick⁶
Trying the mortar's temper 'tween the chinks
Of some new shop a-building.

As G. W. Lamplugh says,¹ Browning does not render in verse the specific results of science, but touches the imagination with a sense of what science is, and may be. See in *Fust and his Friends*:

Man's the prerogative—knowledge once gained—⁷
To ignore,—find new knowledge to press for, . . .
Why, onward through ignorance! Dare and deserve!
As still to its asymptote speedeth the curve.

Browning's knowledge is chiefly of historical character. He has the catholic sympathy for past and foreign civilizations that we find in the German historians of the romantic period. There is nothing in him of the national prejudice

¹ *Nature*, Feb. 28, 1925.

which to my mind spoils some of Tennyson's poetry. Browning's love of his country appears only in two small poems, *Home-Thoughts, from Abroad* and *Home-Thoughts, from the Sea*, which are always quoted because there is none other to quote. On the other hand, he can make himself at will a foreign soul, enter into the mind of a Greek, a Roman, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Mediæval or a Renaissance Italian, and when he describes these people and periods he does it with a scientific accuracy of detail by the side of which Sir Walter Scott's archæology seems almost childish.

But there is more than the outside aspect of things in Browning. "The incidents in the development of a soul," "little else is worth study", he writes. Besides the width, there is the depth. Apart from his knowledge there is the analytical power, the psychological insight that penetrates into the inmost recesses of conscience, lays bare scruples and sophisms, pierces the demi-sincerity of Bishop Blougram or Mr. Sludge, the Medium, or Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau. As the soul is for Browning a fluent element, the depth of his discoveries in that realm is in proportion to their rapidity. Hence it is that, in Swinburne's phrase, he never thinks but at full speed, with spiderlike alacrity, and that, as his language has to keep pace with the celerity of his mind, you had better "study him in the most alert hours of the morning, with an attention awake at all points".

If it is true that the more complex our civilization grows, the more rapid becomes the stream of our thought-associations and of the language adapted to them, the style of Browning was indeed very modern. But it was too much so for most of his contemporaries. "His analysis was too subtle," says the critic, Sir Edmund Gosse, "his habits of

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expression too rapid and transient for the simple early Victorian mind."

The case of Browning in that respect is not an isolated one. There is another case, very similar, very instructive in comparison, namely, that of Meredith, the novelist. He also thinks at full speed, both rapidly and thoroughly; he also will pack in one sentence an incredible number of thoughts, images, and after-thoughts. They both require more effort on the part of the reader than any popular writers before. They both seem to have more brains than other writers. Both are unconventional, self-educated men. Meredith, like Browning, is a cosmopolitan, and a hater of sentimentalism, in the bad sense which has been given to that word. Yet the differences between them are even more instructive than the resemblances, for they help us to understand why the late Victorians did go to Browning after all, sooner than to Meredith. Meredith was more of an intellectual reformer, of an enlightener, and of a heretic. His watchword to his countrymen was: more brains! He was the father of that movement of emancipation from intellectual routine which has been continued by Samuel Butler, by Shaw, by Wells, and by Galsworthy. As to his creed, in particular, he speaks little of Heaven, but much of the "lesson of the Earth", and of obedience to the Cosmic Spirit. He professes a sort of pantheistic monism and of moral stoicism. He accepts Death with this reflection:

Into the breast that gives the rose,⁸
Shall I with shuddering fall?

On the other hand, Browning was nearer his readers in belief and general doctrine. He is not a social reformer, he speaks to the individual only, and does not upset any accepted values. He does not flatter national prejudice, as

Tennyson, but he never attacks it openly. There was nothing in him to frighten those who once got over his difficulties of approach. His lesson is one of moral energy, rather than, as with Meredith, of intellectual lucidity. In short, Browning is more Victorian than Meredith. He remains fast in the Victorian environment by his religious roots. Between himself and his readers there is still a strong link, that of Christianity. When his readers discovered that he was a Christian in spirit, even more persistently and unwaveringly than Tennyson, they thought him worth the trouble to understand, and to understand him devoted an effort which they refused as yet to Meredith. There is little doubt that the popularity which, in spite of his proverbial obscurity, Browning enjoyed at the end of the Victorian period, was largely due to his doctrinal side, his Christianity, and his belief in a future life.

This appears clearly from the *Transactions of the Browning Society*, the organ of this later admiration. We all know that this Society has done excellent work. It had an able and quite impartial president in the eminent Dr. Furnivall; it had such independent or neutral members as Arthur Symonds, James Thomson, Bernard Shaw, who, however, was not very active. But in most of the other members there was a strong religious bias. I could prove this by the titles of the Society's papers, or better still, by quoting the report of a certain meeting of June, 1888, at which a M. Gonner, supported by two other persons, proposed to dissolve the Society, on the plea that it was absorbed in theology more than in poetry. The motion was rejected, but even Mr. Berdoo, who defended the policy of the Society, admitted that the plea was not without foundation. The same Mr. Berdoo, author of a *Browning Cyclopædia*, when publishing, in 1895, the *Select Papers of the Browning*

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Society, said that it had been founded in honour of Browning, or rather for the promulgation of his teaching, and praised the poet for bracing our souls in the degenerate days when men were giving up God for the Unknowable and their faith in Christianity for belief in something not ourselves which makes for Righteousness.

Now these views, however respectable, often led to an erroneous interpretation of Browning. For Browning is an artist before being a teacher or a moralist. He is an artist, by which I mean a man who aims to create new life by imitating and interpreting real life. This was pointed out some twenty years ago by Mr. Chesterton in his well known little book on Browning in the *English Men of Letters* series. But the point needs further development, and inasmuch as Mr. Chesterton is rather addicted to paradoxes, it is perhaps not unnecessary to emphasize one of his that is more than a half-truth.

When I say that the exclusively moral or religious view of Browning led to an erroneous study of his works, I am thinking, for instance, of their allegorical interpretation. Now, there is perhaps but one poem of his which might be called an allegory, that is *Numpholeptos*, where a nymph seated in an orb of white light orders a young man to come to her along violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red beams, without being stained by their colors, which he is unable to do. Even here, the image partakes more of the symbol than of the allegory. Browning's explanation when asked by the Browning Society was very vague: "I had no particular woman in my mind, certainly never intended to personify wisdom, philosophy, or any other abstraction". The fact is that with Browning, and because he is an artist, image and thought, form and thought, if you like, are borne together, deeply intermixed, so that he

does not care to disentangle all the possible meanings of the image, which therefore I call a symbol, whereas I call an allegory what you find in the *Pilgrim's Progress* or in Spenser's Castle of Temperance,¹ where the gate represents your mouth, and the portcullis your teeth, and there is a steward Light Diet, and a kitchen which is your stomach with a master-cook called Concoction and a kitchen-clerk called Digestion.

In an allegory, which is a device, deliberately invented to illustrate a certain idea, everything is precise, definite and explicit. In a symbol, everything is vague and suggestive. That is why allegorical interpretation went so ridiculously wrong when applied to Browning's poem, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. What is the meaning of this poem, with its last lines so infinitely sad?

Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set^a

And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"

A vague and simple meaning, I think: the sadness of human victories; that things never happen as you had expected them, that maturity betrays the hopes of youth, that the present peace of Europe does not fulfill all the hopes of the war, and so on. Now, a whole exegetic literature arose about details of this poem and went on, even after Dr. Furnivall had asked Browning if it was an allegory, and had received in answer on three separate occasions an emphatic no, the poet saying in effect that the poem was simply a dramatic creation with no definite purpose, written in a single day in Paris, the allegorical red horse having been suggested by a red horse in a piece of tapestry belonging to the poet. Allegory is of course a favorite device of the teaching poet. But Browning does not actually teach, either directly, or by allegory. He gives no lectures,

¹ *Faerie Queene*, II, ix.

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speeches, sermons, though so-called critics have built sermons on his texts. It is, I think, a mistake when a good authority like Mrs. Orr¹ classes as didactic a series of his poems such as *A Death in the Desert*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, *the Statue and the Bust*, and *The Boy and the Angel*. There are one or two very short poems with a purpose in Browning, such as *Tray*, and *Arcades Ambo* against vivisection, but they are quite exceptional—outside the main line of his work.

Let it not be thought that I minimize in Browning's work either the predominance or the value of his moral inspiration. To this point I shall revert in a later lecture. I am not such a doctrinaire of art for art's sake that I would prevent poetry from reflecting the whole man in the poet, with his thoughts on life, and if he helps me to live, all the better, but I want to draw the moral myself, and this Browning always allows me to do, for he does not lay down the truth, he seeks it for himself in a way which is not didactic but lyrical.

I shall "vindicate no way of God's to man",¹⁰

. only for myself I speak,¹¹

Nowise dare to play the spokesman for my brothers strong and weak.

Even when he thinks morally, he gives a keen artistic pleasure derived from a hundred small artistic traits, and this is for him the chief thing. He says of the public in *Transcendentalism*,

Thought's what they mean by verse, and seek in verse;¹²

but he replies:

. Song's our art.¹³

At the end of the *Ring and the Book* he allows that

. Art may tell a truth,¹⁴[but how?]

Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought;

¹ Mrs. Sutherland Orr, "A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning", George Bell and Sons, London (1899).

do the thing, that is create the work of art, create new life by imitating real life, and that is with him the primary impulse.

Yet here a suspicion may arise. Granted that Browning avoids the didactic method, what if he were a teacher all the same, a sort of preacher, a popular lecturer slyly disguised in the poetical garb, using the histrionic attitudes of popular preachers? The question may be asked, though I am sure it must be answered in the negative. For, in the first place, there are many poems which are not by an effort of mind reducible to a moral purpose, for example, most of his lyrics, and *A Toccata of Gallupi's*, *In a Gondola*, *Love among the Ruins*, or that almost cynical little piece called, *Adam, Lilith, and Eve*. Secondly, in others, which may or may not have a moral meaning, he seems deliberately to do everything to prevent his being popular, and even to avoid his being understood. He uses a language almost unintelligible, not only in *Sordello*, but in stray poems throughout his career. He actually speaks Latin, in *Fust and his Friends*, or Greek, in *Fifine*, or Hebrew, writing it even in Hebrew type, in *Jochanan Hakkadosh*. So that if he wanted by puzzling you to stimulate your attention, he defeats his own purpose. And thirdly, if at other times he tries to attract you by a grotesque and boisterous humor, then the trap he laid for you becomes one for himself—like Hamlet when he simulated madness, he is "hoisted by his own petard", carried away by the delight in his grotesque power, in one word, by an excess of virtuosity. It may seem strange to use that last word for Browning. We have heard the best critics, notably A. Symonds, say that Browning prefers sense to sound, refuses to use words for words' sake. We are accustomed to see the word virtuosity applied, say, to Swinburne, and what two poets on earth could

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be more different? But there has been misunderstanding with regard to each of them. Because of the wealth of melodious words in Swinburne, people fancied that he was empty, listened to his music and overlooked his thought. Because there is much thought in Browning, they overlooked the quantity of words, thoughts, images which are superfluous to the thought, thrown in as it were in a spirit of play, of sound for the sake of sound, with the difference that it is not melodious sound as with Swinburne; they overlooked the overwhelming facility of expression which allows him to toss, as it were, any thought and it falls in tolerable lines of eight or ten feet, generally provided with a plentiful rhyme; they overlooked the Rabelaisian or Aristophanesque vein in him which delights in a riot of onomatopœic, comical, pun-like rhymes such as "wish-you" and "issue", "Arezzo" and "pet so", the "cub-licks" and "republics", "Italy" and "fit ally", "haunches stir" and "Manchester", "ranunculus" and "your uncle us"—see *Pacchiarotto* and *Aristophanes' Apology*, and remember that Aristophanes is one of the favorites of Browning! I wanted to emphasize this feature because being a virtuoso means being an artist to the excess of the artistic faculty.

Let us now examine Browning's art in itself, in its general principles, and in some of the means he employs. This has not often been done, for when critics speak of Browning as an artist, they generally mean something else: his opinion on painting, on sculpture, or music, of which we shall have to do later on when considering his ideas. Art is for Browning the creation of life by the imitation of life without and within him. Browning above all things is in love with life and makes us love it. He is in love with life more than with beauty, and he is none the less an artist for that. I believe that in art taken on the whole, and, so to speak,

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anthropologically, beauty is a result rather than a primary aim. Although he does not pursue beauty, he meets with it, it comes to him as a natural increase, and is then divinely original, as in *A Grammarian's Funeral* or *A Toccata of Galuppi's*.

Browning is an artist with great and obvious defects, the defects of his qualities. He is, if you like, a great imperfect artist. He does not aim at perfection, nay, he mistrusts it:

What's come to perfection perishes,¹⁵

he declares in *Old Pictures in Florence*, and in *Andrea del Sarto*:

All is silver-gray!¹⁶

Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

He means that absolute perfection is not for this world, and there he is right, but sometimes he might have taken more trouble to reach the relative perfection of which man is capable. Nevertheless Browning is a conscious artist with something like a program. He aims at a certain perfection in getting at and rendering what may be called the roots of life. In *Sordello*, published in 1840, the poet Sordello, who certainly represents Browning, complains that language, being a pure work of thought, cannot render perception whole, that is to say, what we should call the unity of perception. For language, he adds, is the

presentment—of the whole!¹⁷

By parts, the simultaneous and the sole
By the successive and the many.

Yet perfection whole is what Browning is trying to give us and to this end he has developed a special style, which may be called a method of objective or direct presentation, and which manifests itself by a type of sentence highly synthetic and elliptic. It is synthetic, for it gives the poet's thought in the making, with all its ramifications, as we drag from the water an aquatic plant with all its hair-like roots:

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Along with cup you raise leaf, stalk and root,¹⁸
Twitch in the least the root strings of the whole.¹⁹

And it is elliptic, for the depth of the poet's discoveries are, so to speak, in direct ratio with their rapidity. Browning writes at full speed,

As the adventurous spider, making light²⁰
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,

and the result is a sentence which, like a net's throw, captures a piece of genuine, palpitating life.

I call this method objective, because it shows the object directly, the naked thing, suppressing all intermediate agencies between the thing and the reader, all explanations and preliminaries, and hiding as much as possible the writer, the author, the *cicerone*. This is no theory of my own. It is clearly put in *Sordello*:

I circumvent²¹
A few, my masque contented, and to these
Offer unveil the last of mysteries—
Man's inmost life shall have yet freer play.
Leave the mere rude²²
Explicit detail! 'tis but brother's speech
We need, speech where an accent's change gives each
The other's soul—no speech to understand
By former audience: need was then to expand,
Expatiate—hardly were we brothers!

And again:

Yourselves effect what I was fain before²³
Effect, what I supplied yourselves suggest,
What I leave bare yourselves can now invest.
How we attain to talk as brothers talk,
In half-words, call things by half-names, no balk
From discontinuing old aids——

"discontinuing old aids", that is, all the interrupting explanations, all the stepping stones to which other authors had accustomed us.

Here it appears that Browning has a style of his own, and a style deliberately chosen. It is difficult style, a style for advanced readers only, whom he calls "brothers". It is a

style that "docks the smaller parts o' the speech", as the author says, such as most prepositions, and the "to" of the infinitive, and the auxiliary "do" in interrogations, and the relatives "that" and "which"; a style that achieves the feat of writing synthetically in the most analytic of all languages, a language that has no grammatical gender, no case endings and almost no verb endings. That language Browning uses very much as Horace used his Latin, but with the disadvantage that, in Latin, words bear an address as it were, the mention of their whereabouts in the sentence; whereas here it is for you to decide whether a word, "sounds", for instance, is a substantive in the plural or a verb in the third person singular, whether "rip" is imperative or infinitive, whether "stanch" is an adjective or a verb. The result is a pregnant concision that subserves the poet's end, to render "perception whole", "naked soul-life".

It is a difficult style, and was especially so for what Sir Edmund Gosse calls "the simple Victorian mind". But it may be the style of the future, as we believe with the German psychologist Wundt that the more advanced and diversified a civilization becomes, the more rapid the stream of associations, and the more numerous the things implied between speaker and hearer.

To me this sort of style seems strangely modern, as I find something like it in recent French writers and poets so widely different as Claudel, Valéry, Morand, Giraudoux, and Cocteau. They have this in common with Browning's obscurity that they require on the part of the reader a much greater effort than heretofore. There is much more for the reader to supply. They likewise suppress explanations, "discontinuing old aids". Their sentences must be read over and over again, and may be construed in more than one way. They have quite abandoned the old principle: "ce qui

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n'est pas clair n'est pas français". They will throw in allusions to recondite facts which they take for granted, or images far-fetched and unexpected, and when you begin to make up your mind to one image, they will cinematographically pass on to another no less unexpected! For example, Morand, in his book, *Ouvert la Nuit*, speaks of a lady with one half of her sitting in a railway carriage and the other still in the station, which means that she is bending out of the train towards the platform and saying good-bye. Then the writer shows you a British hand with freckles, and a fat German hand, and a dry Russian hand, and you must guess that the lady is shaking hands in turn with an Englishman, a German, and a Russian.

Paul Valéry, in a much admired poem, *Le Cimetière marin*, has this last line:

Un toit tranquille où picoraient les focs.

"Foc" is a sail, a jib, but the public, unwarned by spelling, will certainly mistake it for "phoque" a seal. The implied comparison is of a pecking hen. The same disregard of the reader, the same misleading use of homonyms is found in Browning when he speaks of

a river-horse ²⁴

Sunning himself o' the slime when whirrs the breeze,

"breeze" being here the name of an insect, not of a slight wind.

But enough of this French digression. Let me once more justify the word "objective" which I used as connoting a chief characteristic of Browning's art. The word seems right when Browning paints the outer world, when with unflinching and almost painful realism he seizes on the complexity of things, on their most individual peculiarities, when he paints with the minuteness of a Dutch painter an old manuscript on which it has rained:

With all the binding all of a blister,²⁸
And great blue spots where the ink has run,
And reddish streaks that wink and glister
O'er the page so beautifully yellow.

Or more gracefully those

Glasses they'll blow you, crystal-clear,²⁹
Where just a faint cloud of rose shall appear,
As if in pure water you dropped and let die
A bruised black-blooded mulberry.

Browning here evidently belongs to that class of poets which in *Sordello* he calls the "Makers-see". And the word objective still holds true when he paints the moral world in other persons, when he abridges and dramatizes in a monologue his minute analysis of other people's moral casuistics, or Bishop Blougram, or Mr. Sludge, the Medium, or Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, alias Napoleon the third.

But an objection may be raised: how call objective a poet who is perhaps as great a lyrist as a dramatist? Even here I believe that the distinction holds good. If there is anything like a literary program in Browning, it is to be found, not alone in *Sordello*, as already mentioned, but in his prose *Essay on Shelley*, of 1861, where he draws a parallel between objective and subjective poetry, the latter being represented by his beloved Shelley, and almost synonymous with idealism. "It would be idle to inquire", he says, "of these two kinds of poetic faculty which is the higher or even the rarer endowment—nor is there any reason why these two modes of poetic faculty may not issue hereafter from the same poet which we have hitherto possessed in distinct individuals only."

Now, I believe that Browning is here thinking of himself. For he has really achieved the feat of being subjective in an objective form. He hates the ego in oratorical display. He therefore hates Byron whom he attacks in *Fifine* and elsewhere. He tells you in his short poems *House* and *At the*

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"*Mermaid*" that he will not open his door to any chance visitor, nor give you a key with which to unlock his heart; he declares:

Mine remains the unproffered soul.²⁷

But he is lyrical in an indirect way, so to speak, by proxy much in the way of Goethe, whether he transposes his feelings in scenery, as in part of *By the Fire-side*, or whether according to the preface of his first poem, *Pauline*, he expresses them as "a poetry always dramatic in principle and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine". Finally, he is subjective, in spite of his objective method, by his belief in inspiration and by the respect he pays to the processes of his own mind, in one word, by his intense individualism. This has a good side, since it causes him to create forms exactly suited to his own temper and vision, and a bad side, since it causes him at times to indulge in his own defects.